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ABSTRACT

This study looked at the current and future role of a University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) women's center through surveys of university administrators at several institutions and of current students at UMKC. Sixteen urban, public universities were surveyed by telephone regarding the existence of women's centers, types of programs and activities offered, organizational structure, existence of a women's studies programs, child care facilities and the future of those centers. A survey distributed to a sample of 500 UMKC women students sought information on awareness and participation in women's center programs, and their needs and goals. Data revealed that women students were older and over half of them were graduate students or professional degree students. Although few had participated in Women's Center programs, 44 percent were aware of the Center before receiving the questionnaire. They expressed interest in participating in a wide variety of programs, courses, and activities. Their educational goals were to become knowledgeable and skilled in their chosen career and to develop as a person. They indicated a need for guidance in preparing for their careers and instruction in personal financial management, time management, personal security and health. The data revealed two groups: older women enrolled part-time with marriages and children and younger single women enrolled full-time. (Contains six references.) (JB)

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"WOMEN'S CENTERS IN THE '90'S"

ABSTRACT

One aspect of the women's movement of the 70's was the arrival on college campuses of increasing numbers of older women at a transitional stage in their lives. Student services, including women's centers, expanded to meet their special needs. The women's center at a midwestern, public, urban university recently prepared for its third decade by surveying a representative sample of women students. To better target the center's future activities, the survey inquired about students' goals, difficulties experienced, programs desired, etc. There were significantly different responses, based on demographic variables, to programs of personal development, career counseling, and academic support.

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WOMEN'S CENTERS IN THE '90'S

E. Virginia Calkins

Background:

With the acceleration of the women's movement in the 1970's, an increasing number of older (nontraditional) women arrived on college campuses. They were, for the most part, at a transitional stage in their lives, - often widowed or divorced. They sought preparation for a career or wanted a change of careers. These reentry women had different needs than the college students entering directly from high school (1) (2). By the 1980's, there were more women than men enrolled in institutions of higher learning in this country. These changes produced a critical need for student personnel services for women (3). These new support systems sought to provide role models, career counseling, leadership skills, and an awareness of women's legal rights (4).

In 1989, the director of the Women's Center at Youngstown State University conducted a literature search to learn about women's centers throughout the U.S. (5). She found (using the online ERIC system) few references to such centers but over 10,000 articles about research on women in higher education. In the early 1980's, Frances stineman (6) surveyed 52 public colleges or universities to identify the structure and function of campus-based women's centers. She concluded that the centers' productivity was directly related to institutional support and that a well organized

center enhanced educational experiences, helped retain students, and attracted high caliber women faculty, staff, and students.

As the Women's Center at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) prepared for its third decade of service, the Board of Directors sought to ascertain what programs and services were most needed and wanted by its clients, in order to better target the Center's future activities.

Methods:

As a preliminary step, the author surveyed sixteen urban, public universities by telephone. Following a structured questionnaire, the author inquired about the existence of a women's center, the types of programs and activities offered, the organizational structure of the center, whether or not the university offered women's studies in the curriculum, whether they provided student health services, whether they had a child care facility on campus, and finally - what they saw as the future of women's centers. Seven of the universities replied that they did have an active women's center or programs for women on campus. Four of these were organized under Student Affairs and three under Academic Affairs. Ten indicated that they offered a major or minor in women's studies. Four of the universities provided health services for students on campus, and seven offered some type of child care on campus.

Regarding the future of women's centers, the consensus was that women's centers need the respect or status of an academic tie; that they will be strengthened by the support of a community or advisory board; that the women's movement is growing and women's needs, including child care facilities, are increasing.

The author, serving as a consultant to the Women's Center, developed a survey questionnaire seeking information about respondents' awareness and participation in women's center programs and the kinds of programs or activities which they believed were most needed. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-five questions, ten of which were biographic or demographic. Most questions consisted of several parts and the questionnaire included six open-ended questions. Respondents were asked about their goals in attending UMKC, about any difficulties they had experienced and what they felt could be done to improve the experiences for women at the university. Other open-ended questions inquired about role models and (for those who had interrupted their education) why they had done so and why they had returned to university.

The Registrar's Office at UMKC provided a representative sample of 500 women enrolled during the winter semester of 1991. Extensive follow-up efforts resulted in the receipt of 237 (47%) completed questionnaires. Frequency distributions of responses to each

question were calculated. This was followed by the construction of cross-tabulations of responses to each question with a number of demographic variables; for instance, - age, marital status, children or no children, year in college, full time or part time student, and race. The statistical significance of any differences between demographic variables in each cross-tabulation was determined by Chi Square. The author read and categorized responses to the open-ended questions and determined the frequency of each type of response.

Results:

Demographically, the greatest number of respondents were enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences or the School of Education (31% each), followed by 16% in the School of Business and Public Administration. Fifty percent of the respondents were graduate or professional students, 20% were seniors, and 30% were freshmen, sophomores, or juniors. Eighty-two percent indicated that they expected to earn an advanced or a professional degree. Sixty percent were returning to college after an absence of two or more consecutive semesters. The greatest number were in their 20's (37%), - 14% were less than 20 years of age, 27% were in their 30's, and 22% were age 40 or older. Racially, the respondents were mostly caucasian (84%), followed by 8.4% blacks. Forty-four percent were single; 41% were married; and 35% had children. Asked to describe their political values, 31% indicated that they were "middle of the road;"

29% said that they were "somewhat liberal," and 22% indicated that they were "somewhat conservative."

Somewhat less than half of the respondents (44%) said that they were aware of the Women's Center before receiving the questionnaire. Very few had participated in any of the Center's programs, - the greatest number having participated in the mentor programs (4.6%). When provided with a list of potential programs, 25% or more indicated that they would be interested in participating in the following activities, courses, or programs (in descending order):

career and vocational guidance	- 39%
self-defense classes	- 37%
women's health issues	- 36%
personal financial management	- 33%
time management	- 28%
interpersonal relations	- 27%
securing financial aid	- 27%

The most preferred time for attending such programs was "early evening" - 50%, followed by "late evening" - 38%. Thirty-three percent preferred an "off-campus" locale.

Goals in attending UMKC related to future employment or personal development. The following goals were checked by 35% or more of the respondents (in descending order):

becoming knowledgeable in my field	- 85%
gaining new skills useful in a job	- 69%
building a record that will impress	

future employers	- 44%
gaining self-confidence	- 36%
learning more about myself	- 35%
studying ideas from a variety of subject areas	- 35%

Twenty-one percent or more of the respondents identified the following areas as ones in which they had experienced difficulties while attending UMKC (in descending order):

finding time to study	- 51%
keeping up with family responsibilities	- 46%
keeping up a social life	- 37%
maintaining motivation to continue	- 28%
feeling like a stranger on campus	- 27%
speaking up in class	- 22%
keeping calm when taking tests	- 22%
making friends on campus	- 21%

Thirteen and a half percent of the respondents acknowledged that they had experienced some sort of discrimination as a woman while a student. This discrimination was attributed to attitude or actions by faculty according to 11.8% of the respondents.

Results of cross-tabulations: There were statistically significant differences in the responses of those who have children in comparison with those who do not have children

in the following areas. Those with children reported less difficulty: keeping up a social life

making friends on campus

feeling like a stranger

maintaining motivation.

Those with children were more familiar with the Child Enrichment Center and wanted more flexibility in the Child Center's hours and programs than did those who had no children. Those with children were more apt to have interrupted their education for two or more semesters and were more apt to be part-time rather than full-time students.

Statistically significant differences based on status in college were noted in the following areas:

Awareness of the Women's Center - 62% of seniors indicated that they were aware of the Center before receiving the questionnaire in contrast to 42% of graduate students and a lesser percentage of all others. Graduate and professional students were more likely to have interrupted their education by two or more semesters than were students at other levels. Graduate students were the most apt to be part-time enrolled. Professional students indicated that they were "somewhat liberal" more often than other students.

Expressed interest in Women's Center programs - Junior and senior students were more interested in career/vocational guidance programs than were students at other levels of their education. Senior and professional program students

indicated more interest in women's health issues than did other students. Freshmen were the most interested in Women in the Arts, and freshmen and sophomores were the most interested in programs about securing financial aid.

Differences in educational goals based on year in college - more freshmen and sophomores expressed an interest in learning more about themselves than did students at other levels. Sophomores were the most interested in gaining self-confidence and in becoming involved with the ideas of many fields of learning. Freshmen expressed the most interest in building a record to impress future employers.

Difficulties encountered based on year in college - freshmen and sophomores were the most concerned about making friends on campus and about speaking up in class. Juniors were the most concerned about their study skills, whereas graduate students were the least concerned about maintaining their motivation.

Statistically significant differences between full-time and part-time students were noted in the types of programs they would attend at the Women's Center, in their educational goals, and in the difficulties they had encountered as a student. Full-time students indicated a greater interest in programs about securing financial aid. More part-time students desired programs during evening hours and off campus than did full-time students.

More full-time than part-time students had a goal of learning more about themselves, of becoming involved with

ideas from a variety of disciplines, of becoming more knowledgeable in their field, and of building lasting friendships.

With regard to difficulties encountered, more full-time than part-time students reported having difficulty making friends on campus.

More full-time than part-time students are enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences and are single. More part-time than full-time students are enrolled in the School of Education, are graduate students, and have interrupted their education by two or more semesters.

Statistically significant differences based on age were reported by the respondents in several areas. Dividing them into two age groups, - those age 17 to 29 and those age 30 or older - differences were reported as follows:

The younger students were more interested than the older students in programs in self-defense; had goals of learning more about themselves, of building an academic record to impress future employers, and of establishing lasting friendships. The younger students indicated that they had difficulty making friends on campus and in maintaining motivation. In contrast, the older group of students reported difficulty with family responsibilities. The older students were more apt to have interrupted their education by two or more semesters, to be interested in a child care "drop in" center, and to be enrolled in the School of

Education. Younger students are more apt to be enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences.

There is a direct relationship between age and year in college, between age and full-time or part-time enrollment, and between age and marital status.

There were several statistically significant differences based on the race of the respondents. Blacks were apt to be age 30 or older, to be enrolled in the School of Education, and to be more interested than other racial groups in programs about women's health issues. Blacks and Asians were more interested than Caucasians in programs about career and vocational guidance.

There were statistically significant differences in answers to the questionnaire based on marital status. For instance, the divorced respondents indicated the greatest interest in programs about women's legal rights; they were the most interested in non-traditional careers and in programs on interpersonal relationships. Divorced respondents, more than those of other marital status, had interrupted their education by two or more semesters. Married respondents indicated more difficulties with family responsibilities than those of other marital status, and they were more apt to be graduate students and enrolled part-time. The single students indicated that they had difficulty speaking up in class to a greater degree than those of other marital status. The single students were more apt to be enrolled in

the College of Arts and Sciences than in other schools or divisions of the University.

Responses to open-ended questions:

Forty percent of the respondents completed the question, "What is your impression of the purposes and activities of the Women's Center on the UMKC campus?" The most frequent response was that they were aware of the Women's Center but knew no specifics. The most frequently mentioned programs were the mentor program, the leadership program, and the reentry program. The purposes of the Center cited by respondents were 1) to provide support for women with their careers and 2) to address women's issues and increase awareness of these issues at UMKC and in the community.

Fifteen percent of the respondents indicated additional programs or activities that they would find helpful. These were: personal counseling, support groups, assertiveness training, courses in intracultural affairs or women of color, and a workshop on sexism in commercials and the movies.

Fifty-two percent of the respondents indicated that they had interrupted their education by two or more consecutive semesters. The most frequently mentioned reasons for this were graduating and getting a job (48%) or marrying

and taking on family responsibilities (26%). Six percent mentioned a lack of funds, and 10% indicated a lack of motivation. Reasons given for returning to college were: desire for an advanced degree (24%), self-improvement (20%), determination to complete a degree (18%), needed for career advancement (16%), and obtaining necessary funds (9%).

Forty-six percent of the respondents completed the question, "What could be done to provide more role models for women students at UMKC?" Their most frequent suggestions were: 1) Hire more women faculty, especially in the non-traditional areas of science, mathematics, and business.

2) Promote more women to leadership roles as department chairs or deans.

3) Improve the visibility and accessibility of role models.

4) Publicize more the availability of role models.

5) Match graduate students to undergraduates in the same school or department.

6) Bring in well know women to give lectures or recitals.

Thirty-eight percent of the respondents completed the question, "What do you think could be done to improve the experiences of women students at UMKC?" Their suggestions were: 1) Publicize the services of the Women's Center more, especially at the beginning of a semester.

2) Have more women faculty at UMKC.

- 3) Offer more weekend classes.
- 4) Provide better security at night.
- 5) Provide a child care facility on campus.
- 6) Sponsor casual get-togethers or rap sessions to encourage networking for women.

Discussion and conclusion:

Survey data reveal that women students attending UMKC are older than students at a residence campus. (Forty-nine percent are age 30 or older.) Just over half of them (50.2%) are graduate students or professional degree students. Fifty-two percent have returned to college after an interruption in their education. Over 40% are currently married and 35% have children. Their political values are middle of the road, and they see themselves as good (B or better) students. Most of the respondents (84%) are Caucasian.

Although few had participated in Women's Center programs, 44% were aware of the Center before receiving the questionnaire. The respondents expressed interest in participating in a wide variety of programs, courses, and activities should the Women's Center offer them. Their expressed educational goals are to become knowledgeable and skilled in their chosen career and to develop as a person. They indicate a need for guidance in preparing for their

careers. They seek instruction in personal financial management, in personal security, and in health issues. As they deal with the demands of classes, home, and children, they require help with time management. These women look for role models among the faculty.

Survey data reveal two groups of respondents. One, those age 30 and older who are married, have children, are graduate students, enrolled part-time, and have returned after an interruption in their education. The second group are 29 or younger, single, undergraduate students, and enrolled full-time. These two groups have different program needs. The younger students require career guidance, opportunities for social interaction and personal development, instruction in personal financial management, and faculty role models. The older group are interested in having a child care facility on campus, interested in women's health issues, need help with time management and family responsibilities, and hope for a faculty mentor relationship.

In summary, responses to the questionnaire indicate a continued need for the advocacy role of a Women's Center at a public urban university. Responding to the concerns of two quite different groups of students, such a center should provide programs and activities targeted to women's careers and personal development. It is important that a women's center work closely with university administration in

recognizing the needs of women faculty, staff, and students. With institutional support, a women's center in the 1990's can enhance the educational experiences of all women on campus.

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